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Writing Assignments: A Relatively Emotional Experience of Learning to Write in one Baccalaureate Nursing Program

Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank our readers, Dr. Derek Sellman and Dr. Boba Samuels, for their review of an earlier draft of this paper, and the nursing students and instructors who generously allowed us to come into their classrooms to help us better understand how students learn nursing through writing assignments. This research was funded in part by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council in Canada. Nous souhaitons remercier nos lecteurs, Dr Derek Sellman et Dr Boba Samuels qui ont révisé une version préliminaire de cet article ainsi que les étudiantes et formatrices en sciences infirmières qui nous ont accueillis généreusement dans leurs salles de classe. Ils nous ont permis de mieux comprendre comment les étudiantes apprennent les sciences infirmières à travers leurs travaux de rédaction. Cette recherche a été partiellement financée par le Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada.

In nursing education, writing assignments are common in most courses. Disciplinary writing assignments like scholarly papers, reflections, and care plans are intended to develop metacognitive habits that are integral to professional practice and performance, as a way of thinking, acting, and communicating. As such, learning to write is a fundamental means by which students can learn content, stimulate critical thinking, cultivate professional identity, and assimilate into the discipline and profession of nursing. Many baccalaureate nursing curricula employ two dominant assignments for such practices, the reflective journal and scholarly paper. However, little research has examined how students learn these two writing assignments across the trajectory of a baccalaureate curriculum context. The case study reported here explored learning to write assignments across all four years of one Canadian baccalaureate nursing program, focusing on learning the most frequently assigned genres that students composed in each semester of their program (Chaudoir, 2013; Chaudoir & Liao, 2013). The purpose was to develop an in-depth, contextualized understanding of the ways that students learn to write assignments in each year of baccalaureate nursing. The study specifically documented students' experiences of learning to write two recurring writing assignments called the scholarly paper and journal of reflective practice.

Background

A primary aim of nursing education is to help students develop cognitive and metacognitive skills necessary for clinical decision-making (Marchigiano, Eduljee, & Harvey, 2011; Oermann, Yarbrough, Saewert, Ard, & Charasika, 2009; Profetto-McGrath, 2003). Activities related to writing assignments, such as student-instructor collaboration and writing instruction play crucial roles in acculturating students to professional nursing practice (Allen, Bowers, & Diekelmann, 1989; Newton & Moore, 2010; Troxler, Vann, & Oermann, 2011).

By engaging in collaborative writing assignments, students learn to practice essential disciplinary epistemologies and professional skills. Reflection, application of theoretical knowledge, scholarly research, critical reasoning, and sound clinical judgments all rely on students' ability to communicate well (Giles, Gilbert, & McNeill, 2014; Lasater & Nielson, 2009; Oermann et al., 2015; Rooda & Nardi, 1999; Tanner, 2006). Nurse educators value well-developed written and verbal communication skills because they are known to have a direct relationship to patient safety (McMillan & Raines, 2010). Nursing researchers have demonstrated that writing assignments help develop students' competency and communication skills, both of which are deemed critical to the practice of nursing (Gazza & Hunker, 2012; Luthy, Peterson, Lassetter, & Callister, 2009; Schneider & Andre, 2005; Sorrell, 1988; Sorrell & Metcalfe, 1998; Whitehead, 2002). Such research offers some evidence that writing assignments shape the pedagogical context for students who are learning new disciplinary practices and professional skills in nursing. In other words, nursing students are in a transitional state of learning how to be a nurse through the assignments they are asked to write. With each assignment, students will encounter disciplinary discourse that requires them to practice thinking, speaking, and writing in ways that reflect the conventions of the nursing discipline and profession.

Learning to write such conventions can be challenging to students who are new to disciplinary discourse. Wake (2010) conducted a case study of students learning to write assignments in one course of economics at the University of Adelaide in Australia and discovered that learning to write conventions of economics were incremental at best and overall “devolutionary” (p. 297, *italics in original*). Wake called this an episodic appropriation of

disciplinary discourse, meaning that the ease or difficulty of learning to write genres specific to the field of economics was correlated to the use of language in writing assignments and the dialogic interactions within the economics classroom (p. 307). Rogers's 2008 longitudinal study of college writing assignments at Stanford University found that writing assignment instruction and the language used to teach those assignments were critical components of learning new, disciplinary practices and professional skills throughout their baccalaureate programs. Rogers concluded that classroom dialogue was a pedagogical imperative for students at every stage of their learning.

Developments in academic writing theory and pedagogy in higher education (Beaufort, 2007; Barnett & Coate, 2004; Bazerman et al., 2012; Cross, 1999; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006; Haswell, 2010; Kellogg, 2006; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006) have advanced understanding of best practices for teaching with writing assignments (Graham, MacArthur & Fitzgerald, 2013); responding to student writing (Anson, Horning, & Chaudoir, 2014; White, 2007); discipline-specific models of academic identity (Casey et al., 2006; Chaudoir, Oermann, Grant, Glahn, & Waugh, 2014; Lea & Stierer, 2009); and instructional epistemologies of learning to write in disciplinary contexts (Bean, 2011; Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006; Werder & Otis, 2010). There is a growing consensus among researchers in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) that the discursive interactions associated with academic writing assignments are a pedagogical space in which students are acculturated into professional disciplines (Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day, 2009; Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011; Cooke, Irby, & O'Brien, 2010; Foster, Dahill, Golemon, & Wang Tolentino, 2005; Sheppard, Macatangay, Colby, & Sullivan, 2008; Sullivan, Colby, Wegner, Bond, & Shulman, 2007). This enculturation is essential to teaching learners self-assessment skills and life-long learning (Rijlaarsdam et al., 2008); shaping their (meta)cognition (Berninger, 2012; Marttunen & Laurinen, 2012); and preparing students for professional practice (Shulman, 2005), particularly in professional disciplines such as nursing.

Writing research in undergraduate nursing education has quantitatively documented the kinds of assignments that nursing students were asked to write in particular programs (Andre & Graves, 2013; Graves, 2009; Oermann et al., 2015) or how nursing assignments were assessed within curricular design (Moni, 2011). Gimenez (2008a, 2008b, 2012) has qualitatively investigated the difficulty of teaching/learning particular genres of assignments in nursing, but few case studies have considered how students learn to write assignments across the trajectory of their baccalaureate learning (Carter, 2012, p. 230; Graham & Harris, 2014, p. 91). The study presented here explored learning to write two discipline-specific writing assignments—the scholarly paper and journal of reflective practice—and documented students' experiences of learning to write them in each of the four years of a baccalaureate nursing program. Two research questions that guided the study were as follows:

1. What ways do undergraduates learn to write two recurring assignments, the scholarly paper and the journal of reflective practice, in each year of their nursing program?
2. What instructional enablers and constraints do students experience during the process of learning to compose these two recurring genres?

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative case study was interdisciplinary between the fields of postsecondary education, writing studies, and nursing and part of the lead author's doctoral research. The case study design and method was based on Yin who defines a case study as an “empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (e.g., a ‘case’), set within its real-world context” (2009, p. 18). The qualitative approach was chosen because the research questions that motivated the study were descriptive and exploratory in nature (Yin, 2013). The study design draws from the theoretical frameworks of rhetorical genre (Artemeva & Freedman, 2008; Bazerman, 2004; Miller, 1984, 1994) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to explore contexts of textually-oriented and sociocultural systems of writing activity associated with teaching/learning writing assignments. These frameworks bring together concepts that consider the pedagogical experiences of genre-specific writing assignments.

Traditions of institutional ethnography—observations, interviews, and course documents—guided the data collection (DeVault, 2006; DeVault & McCoy, 2002; Smith, 2005). Observations were in the classroom and focused on writing instruction, discussions of the assignment, and student-instructor and peer-to-peer interaction. Observations took place from the first day of class until the date the assignment was due. Participant interviews were voluntary, semi-structured, about 60 minutes in length, and conducted shortly after the assignment due date and before the last day of the course. Documents included all course materials and assignment descriptions and were collected before observations and interviews began. These tools were intended to qualitatively understand the pedagogical experiences that influence how/why students write assignments the way they do. Therefore, the study explored writing activity that occurred *before* the assignment due date in order to focus on the process (not the product) of learning the assignment.

It is important to note that the research design was based on two assumptions. First, classroom learning and course/assignment documents shape the writing activity, and, second, learning moves continually in, by, and with dialogue through which students, peers, and instructors interact. The limitations of this design were that the analytic tools only partially disclosed teaching/learning processes that shaped learning to write the reflective journal and scholarly paper, and the case study method revealed findings that may not be relevant or applicable to other nursing baccalaureate writing contexts.

Setting

The study took place in a faculty of nursing at a large Canadian research-intensive university and drew its sample from a 4-year baccalaureate degree program that students enter directly from secondary school or with some postsecondary education. At the time of this study, this program had the largest student enrollment and utilized a form of problem-based learning (PBL) called context-based learning (CBL), which employed case studies and professional scenarios as part of its core writing curriculum. There were two types of courses in this sample, seminar-based and clinical-practice courses, and each was six weeks in length. The former occurred in small-group classroom settings on campus and the latter occurred in various community settings off campus. The 4-year baccalaureate program was made up of 33 courses, with 27 of them requiring at least one (and up to nine) writing assignments per course.

The Writing Assignments

The two most frequent writing assignments across all years of this degree program were the journal of reflective practice and the scholarly paper. Assignment descriptions (e.g., tasks, assessment, due date) were part of the course syllabi and given to students on the first day of class. They were available throughout the course on eClass, the faculty's digital repository. The journal assignment descriptions were similar across courses and consistently included the purpose and marking expectations, which tended to emphasize style, format, and content to include in the journal (Appendix A). The scholarly paper descriptions varied significantly between courses. For example, some were lengthy and detailed while others were short and vague. The scholarly paper assignment descriptions in the sample included information such as the content requirements, length, style, format, citation style, and due date. The variety of descriptions could not be provided in the confines of this article. Therefore, Appendix B includes one sample description from Year 3 that best represented the faculty's pedagogical model. Appendix C shows the *General Guidelines for Evaluation of Scholarly Papers*, which was the assessment guide for marking each scholarly paper assignment in our sample.

Participants

After ethics and operational approval were obtained, reputational case selection was made via a faculty liaison, who invited student and instructor volunteers to participate in the study and facilitated the researcher's access to instructional classrooms, course materials, and assignment descriptions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Students and instructors were eligible to participate if they were enrolled in or taught courses within the baccalaureate program. All participants voluntarily provided verbal and written consent.

The final sample included 39 participants (34 students and 5 instructors), four writing assignments (one from each year level; different courses in each year), 22 assignment descriptions, and 38 observations (Table 1).

Table 1

Data Sampled by Year of Program

	Assignment	No. of Students	No. of Instructors	No. of Student Endorsement Interviews	No. of documents	No. of In-class observations	No. of Out-of-class observations
Year 1	Reflective Journal	4	3	8*	10	15	1
Year 2	Scholarly Paper	4	1	0	4	9	2
Year 3	Scholarly Paper	5	0	3	3	0	2
Year 4	Scholarly Assignment	6	1	4*	5	8	1
Totals		19	5	15	22	32	6

* indicates this was one focus group

Data Collection & Analysis

Interviews were the primary source of information for identifying and characterizing participants' perspectives of learning to write assignments across the curriculum. The analysis involved more than 700 pages of data, which included observation notes, course documents,

participants' notes and emails to the researcher, and interview transcriptions. Textual analysis of writing assignment documents was triangulated with classroom observations and participant interviews (Holsti, 1969, p. 16; Mayan, 2009). Assignment instructions and observation field notes were used to prepare for interviews with participants and to cross-check with interview transcriptions during the data analysis stage. Analysis was iterative and employed constant comparison to re-examine existing data against emerging categories in order to capture what mattered most to participants about teaching and learning writing assignments (Bazerman, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 2009; Geisler, 2004; Krippendorff, 2004a; 2004b; Neuendorf, 2002; Yin, 2013). The rationale of using a constant-comparative analytical process was to systematically develop core categories and cluster related codes or themes that accurately reflected experiences of the participants by using their terms and phrases to categorize emergent concepts.

The analysis paid careful attention to the descriptive language participants used to talk about the writing, learning, and teaching and routinely considered: What are the participants describing? What do they care about? What concerns do they have? What do participants regard as influential when learning writing assignments? What additional words, phrases, or literature helped explain their perspective or experience? What problems, if any, were emerging from their responses?

Findings

This section briefly summarizes participants' experiences of teaching and learning the scholarly paper and journal of reflective practice across all four years.

Year 1: "Figuring it out"

Participants described Year 1 as a year of "figuring it out." Students said they were trying to figure out particular writing activities such as "self-directed reflective writing" (often done in small groups), "peer feedback," or "evidence-informed practice." These were hard for students because they had not encountered these writing activities previously. First-year students lacked the experience of knowing what these words meant in the context of the genres or how to integrate peer feedback into unfamiliar genres and had no process for self-directing their own writing. Revision and giving and receiving peer feedback were writing tasks that they "could not quite figure out," and as such, they felt frustrated while learning to write them.

First-year students also reported two instructional practices that caused them trouble while learning to write the reflective journal of practice. First, there were "inconsistent tutor preferences," which from the students' perspective meant the teacher had a subjective or personal preference about how the genre should be written. Instructional differences tended to confuse first-year students and made it difficult to transfer their learning from one course to another. Students often could not take what they learned about writing from one instructor and apply it to the next assignment. As one student explained,

Writing the reflective journal in one course is not like writing it in another. We can't learn to write when tutors' preferences differ or even contradict one another. I was instructed to write the reflective journal one way in [course A] and wrote it the same way in [course B] but got torn apart.

Second, students attributed some of their confusion to unfamiliar variations of the name of the assignment that were otherwise common to instructors. One student pointed out that assignment descriptions explicitly labeled the genre differently in three different documents. The

course outline labeled the assignment as a *reflective journal*, the appendix of the course outline labeled it as a *journal of reflective practice*, and writing assignment templates labeled it as *reflecting on my practice*. One first-year student conceded, “I can’t follow when they keep calling it different things.” Nuanced variations of the name of the genre were hard to follow and diverse views of what constituted “good writing” were even harder for students to figure out in their first year of nursing.

Overall, words, the use of words, and meaning of words in assignment instructions directly affected first-year students’ writing process. Word association (i.e., the student’s and instructor’s image of spoken or written words used to describe or label the assignment) is an integral part of understanding how to write the assignment. Students and instructors shared in their interviews that they associated different meaning to the words *reflective journal*. For example, students tended to think of it as a “diary of my activity” and the instructor tended to think of it as a “theoretical application and critical reflection of community health nursing standards.” One surprise finding was that participating first-year students tended to believe that they understood how to write the genre because they were associating their understanding of the word *journal* from *previous* experience in secondary school and therefore less likely to clarify its meaning in the context of a first-year college nursing classroom.

Year 2: “A Hard Adjustment”

Participants described learning to write in Year 2 as a “hard adjustment,” reporting feeling betwixt and between first-year uncertainty and fourth-year confidence. Some first-year writing challenges remained, and new ones were beginning to emerge in the second year. For example, almost 40% of second-year students confessed to having difficulty with reading. This assignment required students to read primary nursing research and academic journal articles and students reported that reading source materials was one of the most challenging aspects of learning to write.

At this point in their program, students had already written dozens of reflective journals and at least five scholarly papers yet students said they still could not understand the link(s) between discipline-specific readings and discipline-specific writing. It was difficult, for example, to read a primary nursing research article and then summarize it briefly within the scope of the scholarly paper. One student said, “I am still surprised how tough it is to write about research in nursing. I got As in English, so I know I am a good writer, but reading [in nursing] is different.” Another student commented that she could not easily transfer reading and writing skills from English into nursing genres, claiming

Writing in nursing is not the same as other disciplines. Grading is not the same, the writing is not the same as English, we read different things, and the scholarly paper is different than anything else we write. . . I thought I would get it by now but I’m still trying to adjust.

Second-year students expressed that writing in nursing was rather difficult, especially when instructors’ preferences were still not clear to them. From the instructors’ perspective, articulating instructions and expectations were a perennial challenge to classroom teaching. One instructor felt that no matter how explicit she made the writing instructions or how often she repeated her expectations, students “still did not get it.” She dedicated one 45-minute class period to teaching how to write the scholarly paper assignment. This was a seminar-style session co-taught with a writing specialist from the campus writing centre who also offered students

three optional out-of-class peer-writing tutorial sessions. From the instructor's perspective, students who attended these out-of-class peer-writing tutorials tended to "write better essays." However, participating students did not have the same perspective as their instructor. From the students' perspective, there were limits to improving their writing through university-wide writing supports. One student expressed that learning what and how to write from tutors outside the nursing discipline could "only go so far." The word spread quickly amongst peers that generic writing tutorials were limited in helping students advance in areas such as research-specific writing content, required learning goals, projected competencies, disciplinary definitions (often ill-defined in the writing instructions), or implicit/explicit assessment criteria. Students preferred learning to write from nursing instructors themselves because instructors graded the assignments (and graded them according to their own preferences).

Year 3: "It's All Coming Together"

Participants described Year 3 as a year where their ability to write was "coming together." Most students established collaborative relationships with instructors and student peers with whom they could talk more openly and honestly about how to write the assignments. Students desired to have high levels of transparency and trust in the peer-writing environment and appeared to be intentional in creating a safe writing environment for themselves. One student said that because writing in nursing was "assessed writing," he needed to talk about assignments "on the level of how it would connect personal learning goals to nursing competencies and standards of ethical practice." In other words, learning to write an assignment like the scholarly paper had to be discussed with someone who knew disciplinary and professional expectations, norms, and values.

Students reported feeling comfortable discussing their assignment with a health-sciences librarian who was familiar with nursing research literature. Students learned to write from disciplinary librarians in two ways. First, students claimed that librarians helped them "properly search" and navigate electronic databases, identify sources specific to the writing assignment, and distinguish academic and professional nursing literature. Second, students felt comfortable asking librarians to help them read key aspects of nursing literature that were required for the assignment. One student felt that writing a handful of scholarly papers spread over a two-year period was not enough time to master reading research articles in scholarly nursing journals. He said,

Reading an academic nursing research article is almost too advanced for me. I can't master that in just a few assignments. . . . With the [lapse of] time between assignments, I get out of practice [of reading journal articles]. Librarians [can] break it down for me in ways that matter [for] the marking of these assignments.

All participants claimed that writing assignment assessments remained a contentious issue in third year. Students were gradually accepting instructional inconsistencies or subjective assessment practices but they did not like it. One thoughtful student shared that he spent considerable time thinking about the "political aspects" of marking and the ways that assessment affected his learning-to-write experiences. From his perspective,

The whole profession is very political. It is very political because we have very strong connections or very strong ideals about being advocates. I want to be a nurse and I want my writing to be conducive to my learning. I want to understand what the topic means and how we are going to communicate [nursing] situations that are personally,

professionally, and legally complex. I can accept that I may not always learn this from [my teacher]; I can also learn these from my peers and RNs [registered nurses] that I work with. I am starting to collaborate with those who focus not on the grades but on learning for our lives as professional nurses.

Year 4: “It Throws You for a Loop”

Fourth-year participants established personal attitudes and beliefs about how the journal of reflective practice and the scholarly paper “should be written” and these perspectives sometimes conflicted with those of the instructor. Students tried very hard to get one instructor “to tell them what she wanted” but the instructor insisted that students “think for themselves.” The instructor wanted students to make their own decisions about assessment and create their own marking criteria but students felt inadequately prepared for such a task. With no previous experience creating their own assessment criteria, they were apprehensive. One student explained,

In fourth year, we have higher expectations placed on us to make decisions on our own but we are not used to that. We go through so many years of doing everything ‘with guided assistance’ . . . I liked the fact that we have this opportunity [to determine our own marking criteria] but we weren’t sure how to go about it.

Students proceeded to develop the criteria without the direct help of their instructor. One student explained, “We wanted more help [from the teacher], but didn’t make a big deal over it because we knew it would help us develop the skills we needed.” He later realized that this assignment was designed for self-directed and collaborative learning, and said “that’s what [he] came here to learn.”

When students were asked about their experience of learning to write these genres, a surprise finding was that more than half of the students discussed at length their experience as a peer mentor, where they routinely had opportunities to teach junior peer nursing students about writing these two assignments. In this case study, peer mentoring was not the same as peer review or peer feedback. Rather, peer mentoring was a voluntary program organized by the Undergraduate Nursing Student Association, pairing fourth-year nursing students with first- or second-year students to help guide them through the demands of the program. Fourth-year students claimed that showing junior peer nursing students different ways to write assignments “was the best way to learn to write.” From their perspective, mentoring helped them internalize the learning-to-write and writing-to-learn pedagogy of this baccalaureate nursing program. Meaning, by mentoring junior peers, fourth-year students became cognitively and socially aware of how to write the genres of the scholarly paper and journal of reflective practice. For instance, they shared things like, “I learned how to write an introduction for a scholarly paper when I had to teach it to the first-year student who I was mentoring;” “I learned how to cite my references in a reflective journal when I had to teach my second-year mentee how to do it;” and “I learned how to incorporate a reflection into a conclusion when I showed a first-year student how to do it in her scholarly paper.”

Discussion

The Student-Instructor Relationship

Findings suggested that student experiences of learning to write the journal of reflective practice and scholarly paper across all four years were highly influenced by the relationships that

constellated around the assignment. Students discussed the frustrations, challenges, and benefits of learning to write the assignments with peers and librarians, but no other relationship was as influential as the student-instructor relationship. The findings re-emphasize the humanistic context of teaching/learning in nursing education, where the student-instructor relationship is a vital component to classroom learning outcomes. In other words, student-instructor relationships (not writing strategies) are the centrifuge to writing-to-learn/learning-to-write approaches, especially in writing intensive curricula like this one. Learning how to write discipline-specific genres cannot be reduced to a set of strategies because the student-instructor relationship evolves and devolves dynamically and unpredictably. Of course, instructors can use specific strategies to teach writing, but the relationships in the classroom learning environment must be conducive to employ those strategies for that specific assignment genre (Bean, 2011; Burke & Williams, 2011).

Newer, evidence-based pedagogies in nursing education that promote empathy, openness, and mutual respect have the ability to transform learning-to-write experiences in nursing. One such approach is narrative pedagogy, in which learning how to write is egalitarian between the nursing student and the educator (Brown, Kirkpatrick, Mangum, & Avery, 2008; Ironside, 2006, 2014). In this approach, the student and instructor co-create writing experiences. Relational-cultural theory (RCT) (Jordan, 2010) helps explain that, in the classroom learning environment, the student and instructor are never separate. They are interdependent and mutually learning from one another as partners. RCT suggests that the student's learning-to-write experiences are not on a continuum from dependence to autonomy. Rather, the student is in a relationship with the instructor and the relationship is an intricate blend of connections and disconnections, moving towards (or away from) cognitive maturity and emotional autonomy (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004; Jordan, 1997; Gillespie, 2005).

The Emotional Side of Teaching

In this study, emotions significantly influenced nursing students' ability to write the assignment and how they intellectually grasped the connection(s) between writing and learning. As students progressed through this baccalaureate nursing program, regardless of year level, and in spite of recurring exposure to the genre type, they encountered myriads of "teacher preferences" that were difficult to adjust to. Their emotions ran high in these contexts of writing/learning because of perceived instructional inconsistency from assignment to assignment.

Research by Brookfield (2006), Hargreaves (2000), and Zembylas (2005; 2007) show, for example, that postsecondary teaching is an emotionally-laden practice, which can saturate and slow the cognitive and intellectual growth of students. Brookfield (2006) suggests that postsecondary classrooms are filled with *emotional rhythms* and that the rhythms of learning and teaching are not smooth because they are routinely filled with "unpredictability, ambiguity, and frustration" as well as "fulfillment, success, and satisfaction" (p. xiii). Our findings showed similar emotional and relational contexts of frustration, which demonstrated that there can be a relational-emotional unpredictability of learning by, with, and through different genres of writing assignments.

Some of most emotionally-laden comments made by students regarded the use of language and terminology. For instance, instructors may have assumed that subtle variations in a term or assignment label (e.g., *reflective journal* and *journal of reflective practice*) meant the same to students as it did to them. However, inconsistencies created confusion and became a

barrier to students' ability to learning/writing the assignment. Therefore, during our interview conversations with participants, we asked them to suggest ways to improve writing instruction for these genres. Appendix D summarizes suggestions from both students and instructors.

Conclusion

This article reported findings of a case study of nursing students learning to write two recurring assignments across four years of one Canadian baccalaureate nursing program. The purpose was to develop a contextualized understanding of the ways that nursing students learn them. First-year students worked to "figure out" disciplinary practices and uses of language and terminology and tended to view writing as a product rather than a way to learn disciplinary practices. Constrained by their lack of knowledge about disciplinary discourse, first-year students relied heavily on their instructors' directions as authoritative knowledge on how to write disciplinary genre but differences in instructors' explanations of the genres were a source of angst for students.

Second-year students recognized that genre styles and expectations in nursing were different from those in other disciplines. They were also more aware of their inability to read nursing literature sufficiently yet kept their struggles hidden. This difficulty with reading was a significant barrier to learning to write in that students were not able to incorporate research literature sufficiently into their own written essays and reflections. Second-year students were more apprehensive about who they sought advice from and preferred writing guidance from those who clearly understood the disciplinary literature.

Third-year students were adjusting to instructional inconsistencies, which persisted with each assignment they wrote. Students started building a network of trusted individuals (peers, librarians) with whom they could exchange and explore ideas about writing. For some, learning to write was challenging when political or ideological aspects of writing and grading influenced writing instruction and assessment.

Fourth-year students formed their own opinions about how assignment genres should be written. Rather than negotiate, fourth-years students often acquiesced to the instructor's preferences. Interestingly, fourth-year students applied their knowledge about writing through peer mentoring relationships with junior peer nursing students. Peer mentoring allowed fourth-year students a venue in which to talk about writing assignments that they had already written in previous years. They had an opportunity to help younger peers who were writing these assignments for the first time, and the fourth-year students could empathize with their younger peers' writing struggles.

Overall, this case study demonstrated that recurring writing assignments like the scholarly paper and journal of reflective practice can present unique and ongoing factors that enable and constrain learning to write. Across all four years, students had to learn to write within a framework of uncertainty and frustration. More research is needed to help facilitate writing instruction consistently across all the years of baccalaureate nursing degree programs. Of particular importance is gaining a better, comprehensive view of the writing experience from year to year and how writing assignments shape and are being shaped by the student-teacher relationship in *each year* of nursing.

For example, the second-year writing experience is an overlooked and understudied year in nursing research literature. Postsecondary education researchers at the University of South

Carolina, Gahagan and Stuart-Hunter (2006), note that the second-year student experience is the least understood amongst college teachers and is the year when students are the most vulnerable to attrition. During the second year, students can feel uncommitted and undecided regarding a major area of study. Students over-worry about grades because if they decide to transfer to another program at the end of second year, then they believed they needed the highest marks possible in order to be accepted to another program. This is an emotional uncertainty that can impede any sense of growth within a student's disciplinary writing and learning process.

It was almost 30 years ago that Susan McLeod vividly described her observations of just how emotional learning to write can be for college students (McLeod, 1987). The lead author's doctoral research of writing in baccalaureate nursing demonstrated that learning to write can still carry emotional overtones that are unpredictably subjective. The concept of learning-to-write discipline-specific genres can be deepened with the notion that genres are *relational* and that writing assignments operate as a function of the classroom relationships, which are entangled with ever-changing phenomena. Well-structured theories like relational-cultural theory (RCT) re-define writing activity as "movement-in-relationship toward better connection" (Jordan, 2010, p. 109). Within the context of fluctuating perspectives of writing, if growth is to occur, then learning to write "requires mutuality in movement" (p. 110) between the student and instructor. Learning discipline-specific genres like the journal of reflective practice and scholarly paper can be filled with unresolved challenges and unanswered questions and it is tempting to dwell on these problems. However, focus instead on the ways that students, instructors, and peers can mutually move toward better connection, building collaborative relationships necessary to support students who can competently write these recurring assignments from course to course and year to year. Without the relationships in place, writing-to-learn/learning-to-write strategies will not be effective nor will they be sustainable for the long term.

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Appendix A

Sample Assignment Description for the Journal of Reflective Practice

A journal of Reflective Practice reflects a response to specific guiding questions posed by the nurse. The tutor will provide guided questions. Questions are related to the application of theory to practice and to encourage the student to critically reflect to ensure accountability, theoretical application, and critical reflection of nursing standards. Tutors may ask for written or verbal journals.

Expectations for each journal entry are:

1. Use APA 6th Edition to format your journal and references.
2. Journal entries must draw primarily on clinical experiences. However, journal entries need to be supported through using evidence from the literature. Literature incorporated must be included in a reference list.
3. The Journal is a component of the Evaluation of Nursing Practice (ENP) and journal entries can be used in the self-evaluation component and year-end competencies.

Appendix B

Sample Assignment Description for the Scholarly Essay

Assignment Scenario:

Patient abuse is a serious offense that, when committed, must be promptly addressed.

You are a Registered Nurse (RN) in an acute care setting. You overhear one of your RN colleagues verbally abusing a patient. Outline how this situation must be dealt with legally/ethically and professionally.

Assignment Format:

Length of Assignment:	Page 1: Cover Page
	Note:
	a) Course Number
	b) Section Number
	c) Student ID# only
	d) Tutor First & Last Name
	Page 2: Abstract
	Pages 3-6: Introduction/Body of Paper/Conclusion
	Page 7: Reference List (number of references is Based on the discretion of the tutor)
Due Date:	Monday, October, 10 th (at beginning of class)
Late Papers:	10% grade reduction per day for assignments handed in late without prior consent of the tutor.
APA Format:	APA format is required. In this course, scholarly papers must include an abstract as well as headings throughout the paper. See APA manual for guidance.
Grading:	The assignment will be marked according to the <i>General Guidelines For Evaluation of Scholarly Papers</i> with the Course Outline.
References:	A variety of references will be required for this assignment.
Submission:	Bring a paper copy to your class and/or email directly to your tutor and/or as requested by your tutor.

Appendix C

Sample of the General Guidelines for Evaluation of Scholarly Papers

Outstanding 28 - 30	Extraordinary and creative writing ability demonstrated in development and presentation of ideas. Outstanding integration of theoretical and/or empirical knowledge. Consistent identification of salient argument(s) throughout. Objective application of evidence and reasons to support warranted, justified conclusions and appropriate generalizations in relation to the topic. Grammatical presentation and APA format require minimal revision.
Excellent 25 - 27	Excellent writing ability demonstrated. Paper has structure and is well organized. Identifies relevant ideas. Creative and thorough integration of theoretical and/or empirical knowledge with own ideas. Thoughtfully evaluates alternative points of view. Draws warranted conclusions. Grammatical presentation and APA format require minimal revision.
Very Good 21 - 24	Sound writing ability evidenced. Structure and organization of paper is appropriate. Integration of theoretical and/or empirical knowledge is evident. Accurate interpretation of evidence, statements, graphics, and questions related to the topic, allows for identification of most key ideas. Thoughtfully evaluates major alternative points of view. Justifies conclusions appropriately. Grammatical presentation and APA format require a few revisions.
Good 18 - 20	Generally well written with a few specific areas regarding structure and/or organization requiring improvement. Integration of theoretical and/or empirical knowledge with own ideas is evident in the identification of key ideas. Identifies some alternative points of view. Offers some relevant supporting evidence for ideas. Draws conclusions. Explanation of assumptions and reasons for conclusions is attempted. A few incorrect grammatical structures and spelling errors evident. APA format requires some revision.
Satisfactory 15 – 17	Acceptably written with several specific areas regarding structure and organization needing improvement. An attempt to integrate theoretical and/or empirical knowledge with own ideas is evident. Identifies a few key ideas, however information is incomplete and/or superficial. Little evidence of analysis or evaluation of alternative points of view. Draws a few conclusions. Explanation of assumptions and reasons for conclusions is inadequate. Several incorrect grammatical structures and spelling errors are present. A number of APA format errors occur throughout the paper.
Fail 1 – 14	Writing demonstrates inability to fully carry out assignment directions. Organization and scope of ideas are inadequate. Poor integration of theoretical and/or empirical knowledge with own ideas. Little evidence of analysis or evaluation of alternative points of view. A few conclusions are drawn. Justifies conclusions with superficial explanation of reasons or draws unwarranted or fallacious conclusions. Incorrect grammatical structures and spelling errors evident. Minimal evidence of APA format.

Appendix D

Participant Suggestions to Enable Writing Instruction

During our interviews, we asked participants to suggest ways that may help them adapt to the changing nature of learning to write assignments across all four years. We received pragmatic suggestions from students and teachers that may better enable writing-to-learn/learning-to-write strategies in the day-to-day learning of nursing classrooms.

Students' suggestions were:

- define and repeat often the definition of the genre in the context of disciplinary discourse. For example, define *scholarly* or *reflection* within the meaning of *evidence-informed practice*;
- explain the assignment's marking criteria throughout the entire course, not just once or at the beginning of the course;
- have the genre taught by someone well-versed with the disciplinary language, literature, and assessment expectations;
- provide ongoing, genre-specific reading supports that help with reading the various different kinds of nursing literature. Most needed was help reading academic research articles in nursing journals; and
- design writing supports that are genre-specific and developmentally appropriate for each year level. Students writing their first or second scholarly paper need more structured support than those who are writing the genre for the fourth, fifth, or sixth time.

Teachers' suggestions were:

- replace general marking/scoring guidelines with assignment- and component-specific marking guidelines or rubrics;
- allow instructions/assignment descriptions for recurring genres, like the scholarly paper, to be flexible and adaptable and to move with students as they advance through the program, gain experience with writing the genre, and develop personal/professional writing habits;
- reduce class size to accommodate the pedagogical attention required for teaching students how to write assignments; and
- in order to help students with valued communication skills such as summarizing, redesign the scholarly paper assignments in years 1 and 2 to focus on learning how to read nursing literature and writing summaries of nursing literature (rather than writing full-length essays).

The last suggestion is supported by Luthy, Peterson, Lassetter, and Callister (2009) and Kegan (1994) who contend that beginning college students often feel overwhelmed by a new writing assignment/activity and do not know how to start. Breaking an assignment into smaller parts, providing consistent feedback during the drafting process, and reasonably spacing the due dates for each component can help students grasp each task of the assignment and familiarize themselves tasks/activities of the genre.